

2004 San Diego Op-Ed

Diseases Have No Borders

By

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Today, many children in San Diego County and Southern California are suffering and, sadly, some are dying from a disease thought by many to no longer exist, whooping cough.

During the 20th century, whooping cough was one of the most common childhood diseases and a major cause of childhood deaths. There were more than 200,000 cases of whooping cough each year in the United States during the 1940s, prior to the availability of an effective vaccine. After the widespread use of pertussis or whooping cough vaccine began, cases fell by more than 98 percent. Whooping cough among infants was at record-low levels in the late 1970s when there were fewer than 700 infant cases in the United States each year.

The reduction of whooping cough was a great accomplishment, but now we are faced with a resurgence of the disease and it is threatening the health of our children. During 2002, in San Diego County alone there were 230 reported cases of whooping cough, the largest number of reported cases in the county over the last 18 years. In California the number of reported whooping cough cases increased from 706 in 2001 to 1,120 in 2002.

The Latino population is also experiencing a dramatic rise in the number of whooping cough illnesses. The number of reported cases among Latinos in California increased from 255 in 2001 to 442 in 2002.

Whooping cough causes great suffering in young children and often makes infants so ill they need to be hospitalized just to breathe. In California, during 2002 five children died from pertussis-related complications. The suffering of a child places a terrible burden on families which cannot be measured in dollars. But there is also a cost to society. Health care costs take a heavy financial toll on local municipalities. In San Diego County alone, whooping cough hospitalization costs hit nearly \$1 million in 2002.

This alarming rise in the number of whooping cough cases will be highlighted as local and state public health organizations join forces with national and international organizations on a bi-national education campaign to promote the benefits of immunization.

Low immunization coverage is an issue that impacts the entire border region. Therefore, community resources and more importantly, cross-border collaboration by health care providers, public health officials and parents is essential to increasing immunization

coverage. A decision to vaccinate a child is a decision to not only protect that individual child, but to protect the entire community by reducing the spread of disease.

During National Infant Immunization Week, April 25-May 1, and Toddler Immunization Month, May 2004, public health coalitions from San Diego and across the state will be staging a series of educational *Stop Whooping Cough!* events aimed at educating parents and children about the importance of vaccination.

San Diego will be participating in an unprecedented multi-national Western Hemisphere campaign to promote immunization in all countries of the Americas starting April 25th. San Diego is partnering with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the United States-Mexico Border Health Commission (USMBHC) and more than 35 countries for Vaccination Week in the Americas (VWA), April 24-April 30, 2004.

The coalition will stage cross-border health events to highlight the importance of bi-national teamwork in protecting children from vaccine-preventable diseases. This effort is especially important because diseases do not recognize borders.

Immunizations are one of history's greatest and most cost-effective public health tools for preventing serious disease and death. Current immunization rates in California among whites and Latinos are 76% and 78%, respectively. By working collaboratively across borders, we can increase our immunization coverage rates to ensure all children are fully protected against vaccine-preventable disease.

We have achieved great successes in immunization, having eradicated smallpox from the Americas in 1971 and polio in 1991. We are now working on eliminating measles and rubella, but this can only succeed if all countries make sure all children are vaccinated.

The resurgence of whooping cough should be a reminder to parents that many vaccine-preventable diseases are still circulating and can return with a vengeance if we fail to maintain high childhood immunization coverage. Getting your child fully immunized from 12 vaccine-preventable diseases, including whooping cough, will reduce health care costs and help protect your child from a potentially serious disease. On-time vaccination for infants at 2, 4, 6, 12 and 15 months of age is the best protection against all vaccine-preventable diseases.

All Parents should make a promise to fully immunize their child against vaccine preventable diseases. They should make an appointment today with their health care provider to check their child's immunization record and vaccinate on time, every time.